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# Text, Genre and Multi-Genre

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**Abstract:** The essay mainly explores three concepts—text, genre, and multi-genre, and their mutual relationship. A text is a realization of a particular genre or a multi-genre. The generic or multi-generic structure potential is capable of generating countless number of texts.

**Key Words:** Text; Genre; Multi-Genre; Mono-Generic Texts; Multi-Generic Texts

## 1. TEXT

In Van Dijk's account of a 'text grammar', he holds that the concept of text could be regarded as 'continuous discourse', which has two structures: a deep or macro-structure 'as a whole' and a surface or micro-structure. The transition from macro-structure to micro-structure is carried out by a set of transformation rules. (Van Dijk, 1972) According to Van Dijk's point of view, the notion of text is the basic linguistic unit, which is manifested at the surface as discourse and may be compared to a super-sentence. The general distinction of text from sentence consists in the fact that the former is generally much larger than the latter in length.

Halliday shows strong objection to the view of text as the basic linguistic unit. He argues that the notion of the text as a super-sentence is essentially comparable to that of sentence as a super-phoneme; it ignores the essential fact that the two are related by virtue of realization, not by size. For that reason Halliday proposes that text be regarded as the basic unit of semantic structure---, that is, of the semantic process. Text is the actualized meaning potential; it is the product of infinitely many simultaneous and successive choices in meaning, and is realized as lexico-grammatical structure, or 'wording'. (Halliday, 1978) In his book *Language, Context, and Text---Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective* in collaboration with Hasan, he gives a much more elaborate expression of his definition of the notion 'text': 'We can define text, in the simplest way perhaps, by saying that it is language that is functional. By functional, we simply mean language that is doing some job in some context, as opposed to isolated words or sentences that I might put on the blackboard.' (Halliday & Hasan, 1989) Text is an independent and fundamental semantic unit; it is used to achieve a particular purpose or accomplish a task in a specific context of situation.

In some academic works in linguistics, a subtle distinction is made between the two technical terms 'text' and 'discourse'. (Gillian Brown & George Yule, 1983) The former refers to the written record of a communicative act in particular, whereas the latter is set aside for those produced in a verbal or spoken social interaction, such as conversations, gossips, verbal exchanges of academic views, and lectures. In this thesis I would consider such a distinction as unnecessary or insignificant. In other words, the two terms are inter-exchangeable for each other without any minor connotative or denotative difference. The reason for that dismissal is that the distinction between written and spoken, which is linguistically formal difference in

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nature, does not exert any negative or unfavorable influence on the fact that text is just language that is functional in a specific context of situation in which it is generated.

The definition of the concept of text adopted in the thesis, which is approached from a socio-linguistic perspective, has an important implication that the length of a continuous linguistic sequence is not a vital criterion for defining what a text is. The acquisition of an independent and complete purpose for a verbal communicative event enables any linguistic sequence to be entitled as a 'text', irrespective of its length. However, texts do differ from one another in a significant manner in size. Generally speaking, a text is composed of more than one sentence or paragraph which is closely related to each other in meaning. Exceptions to that generally accepted rule does exist; some peculiar texts do contain one sentence or one phrase or group, which may be labeled as mini-texts. The most easily discernable examples of mini-texts are those written on signs or boards in public places. For example, in a world-class tourism destination we frequently encounter such upright signs which read 'Please do not litter'. In a conference parlor, a board of 'No Smoking!' may hang conspicuously on the wall, which reminds the attendants of prohibition of smoking during the meeting. 'No Smoking!' and 'Please do not litter' are typical exemplars of mini-text, for they carry out a complete communicative purpose in a particular situation. But for the facilitative purpose in the research, the texts cited in this thesis are mainly larger ones consisting of more than two or more paragraphs, rather than those mini-texts.

There are two other respects of the notion of text which is of some extent of relevance to the discussion of the topic in the thesis. The first one is the distinction of 'texts' and 'non-texts'. A stretch of passage containing a number of sentences does not necessarily make a text. According to Halliday, generic structure, textual structure (thematic and informational), and cohesion--- these three factors are the fundamental and defining criterion for differentiating texts from non-texts. The second aspect is involved with another distinction of text and text fragment. Text fragments contained in the same text are generally closely related to one another, and under certain circumstances may achieve some extent of independence in the whole text. In spite of that, the completeness of a text is of vital importance for the study of the subject matter in the thesis, for it is only from the holistic perspective of study that the generic structure realized by a particular text could be displayed in the most conspicuous and most easily perceptible way.

## **2. GENRE**

Hasan (Halliday & Hasan, 1989) defines genre as type of discourse. In her discussion of structural elements of a text, she makes a much more explicit claim that genre is defined by obligatory elements in structure. Contextual configuration, which is another key concept in Hasan's analysis, consists of three variables: field, tenor, and mode, and could be used to make predictions concerning the obligatory and the optional elements of a text structure. However, owing to the fact that obligatory elements show strong association with the variable field in contextual configuration, it seems that in Hasan's definition the identification of the notion of genre is mainly determined by the contextual variable field. (Martin, 1992)

Martin's view of genre is somewhat different from that of Hasan, who claims that the obligatory elements define the genre to which a text belongs. Martin agrees with the position taken by Halliday that the concept of genre has correlation with all the three variables-field, mode, and tenor, rather than mainly with one variable field. Martin presents his own definition of the notion of genre: a genre is a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture. (Martin, 1984) To put it in a less technical way, "genres are how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them". (Martin, 1985)

Before the presentation of the definition of the concept of genre adopted in the thesis, two controversial issues linked to the adequate circumscription of the notion need to be clarified in an explicit way:

- a). Is a genre a linguistic or a social activity?
- b). Does a genre have an overall purpose or not?

As regards the first issue, Martin states his explicit position that genre is a social activity. There would be as many different genres as there are recognizable social activity types in one culture. Though Hasan does

not make any explicit statement of her opinion of the issue, her definition of genre as type of discourse implicates that she tends to consider genre as a linguistic activity. Swales shares Hasan's point of view in that issue. He argues that a genre is a class of communicative events, and that a communicative event is one in which language plays both a significant and an indispensable role.

Generally speaking, language and social activities usually display such a strong association with one another that each could be used to make certain kind of predictions about the occurrence of another. For example, in a type of social activity named telephoning, one can predict that there must be some linguistic behavior by one or two of the speakers involved during the whole course of the activity. Likewise, if a person just overhears that someone in the next door is saying "Hello, this is Miss Smith. Is your boss Mr. Gates around at the moment?", he or she could immediately form a judgment that what the speaker Miss Smith is engaging is an institutionalized social activity of telephoning. The reason for that is the mutual predictability of language and social activity. Nevertheless, not all the social activities that can be recognized in a culture are accompanied by a certain kind of linguistic behaviors; some may be carried out exclusively by pure actions, without any language playing a part in it. Take a service encounter for example. A would-be purchaser has a plan to buy a package of best-quality sour milk in the supermarket to which he pays his regular patronage. It is assumed that the customer is familiar with the merchandise supplied by the supermarket, and is very well acquainted with every aspect of the goods he really wants, such as prices, quality, and so on. What he has to do to accomplish the purchase is selecting the item of goods he intended to buy, waiting in queue for his turn of payment before a counter, paying the bill, and leaving the supermarket with that package of best-quality sour milk. During the whole course---the span of time from his entry to the supermarket to his departure, he may not utter a single word of enquiry or exchange some greetings or whatsoever with either the salespersons standing near the merchandise of every conceivable kind or the assistant at the counter. The whole transaction is carried out exclusively by a series of actions. Consequently, though the transaction is an easily recognizable type of social activity, it does not belong to the genre of service encounter, for there is no linguistic behavior and no verbal text being generated at all.

There is another case that language and action intertwine with each other to accomplish a type of social activity. Take the above mentioned social activity of telephoning for example again. The whole interaction through telephone involves not only the linguistic exchange between the caller and the receiver, but also a range of actions related: picking up telephone receiver, dialing the number of another participant, hanging up the receiver. Undoubtedly, it is obvious that the linguistic behavior plays a significant and predominant role in the whole process of telephoning.

To summarize, a good solution of the issue of whether to classify the concept of genre as a social or linguistic activity is to take the role of language into consideration. In making a formulation of contextual configuration, Hasan presents a distinction of two types of language roles: constitutive and ancillary. (Halliday & Hasan, 1989) If a communicative event is realized solely and exclusively by linguistic means, then we can say that the role of language is constitutive. On the other hand, if a communicative event is carried out by mainly a series of actions, which are accompanied by some linguistic behavior, then the role of language would be ancillary. However these two categories should not be seen as sharply distinct from each other; as a matter of fact, they serve as the two end-points of a continuum, with most cases of communicative events falling in between. Only when the role played by language is approaching the constitutive extreme of the continuum, could a communicative event have the possibility to be institutionalized as a type of genre. Therefore, it is advisable to define the concept of genre as a linguistic activity, rather than a social one.

As regards the second issue of existence of an overall purpose in a genre, Martin has repeatedly stressed that every genre is goal-oriented. "The register variables field, tenor, and mode can then be interpreted as working together to achieve a text's goals, where goals are defined in terms of systems of social processes at the level of genre." (Martin, 1992) Martin further states that there are two advantages in attributing an overall goal to the concept of genre: (Martin, 1992)

- a). The notion of telos is a useful one for glossing systemic relations between combinations of field, mode and tenor choices at the level of genre.
- b). Approaching genre from a teleological perspective is also useful in accounting for the way in which texts typically move through stages to a point of closure and are explicitly treated by speaker/listener as incomplete where closure is not attained.

For the purposes of generic analysis, it is useful to classify the goals that the genres aim to realize into two types: pragmatic and interpersonal. A goal is pragmatic if the genre is employed to achieve something tangible and material. For example, service encounter is a genre whose aim is to carry out a particular kind of transaction; thus, its overall goal is a pragmatic one. If a genre is designed to establish and maintain social relations or create mutual good feelings between participants in that genre, its general goal is an interpersonal one.

With the clarification of those two issues, it is advisable to present a definition of the concept of genre like the following: genre is the type of discourse generated in the process of a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture.

### 3. MULTI-GENRE

#### 3.1 Definition

The concept of multi-genre, about which no one has present any innovative definition before, may be simply defined as the functional integration of two or more genres into one, which has some of the essential characteristics of both, but is not identified as an institutionalized one. In order to facilitate the understanding and comprehension of the definition, which is just a tentative working one needing further revisions, the following statements are made concerning the nature of multi-generic phenomenon:

First, it is a kind of functional integration, rather than simple combination or mixing, at the levels of both genres and texts realizing such multi-generic phenomenon. According to *American Heritage Dictionary* (4<sup>th</sup> edition), the act of integration is defined as “To make into a whole by bringing all parts together; unify”. The essential point in that definition is the unit of every component or parts, all of which co-exist in harmony with one another. It is the suggestive meaning of the exact word ‘integration’ that could faithfully reflect the true characterization of the multi-generic phenomenon. Two or more genres do not simply mix with another, with each of them maintaining its independence from each other. They interrelate, interact, and intertwine with each other. Each of them serves a certain purpose or function in the overall framework; however, all of them cooperate with each other to form or fulfill one general goal. Each of those genres contained in a multi-generic phenomenon contributes to, rather than ruins or upsets, the all-pervading harmony in the integrated result. Moreover, the integration is not a formal one, but a functional one. There are two implications for that functional perspective. For the first thing, it is an overall goal or purpose that connects a number of different genres with each other. Without that general aim, there would not be a kind of phenomenon that is entitled as multi-genre; each member of genres would be considered as separate and independent from one another. The second implication for functionality is that there is not only an overall goal which relates one genre to another, but also a set of closely related sub-goals. Those sub-goals are usually realized by the member genres of a multi-generic phenomenon. In other words, each member of genres involved plays a particular role or accomplishes a specific purpose in the general environment.

Second, the integration displays itself at the level of text as well as genre. Multi-genre is not at higher level or communicative plane in semiotic system than genre is; they are positioned at the same level of abstraction. In a certain sense, the relationship between genre and multi-genre is comparable to that of group and group complex or that of clause and clause complex in Halliday’s systemic-functional grammar. At the level of genre, the integration of members of a multi-generic phenomenon is reflected by the fact that there is an overall goal which directs and coordinates the member genres and that each of the member genres has its own particular function in the general framework. At the level of text, the linguistic realizations of different member genres in a multi-generic phenomenon equally demonstrate a kind of unit throughout the whole text. A text generated by a multi-genre does not have any distinction from that generated by one single genre in the respect of texture, although the structural element in the former may realize different member genres in the multi-generic phenomenon. Multi-generic texts also have cohesive devices, such as substitution and reference, to help achieve coherence in the text.

Third, the result of integration at the level of genre has the essential characteristics of all the member genres involved in a multi-generic phenomenon. Though the member genres correlate and interact with each other to produce an integrated multi-genre, their distinctive identity could still be recognized in the

overall framework. As Hasan has presented, a genre is defined by the obligatory elements in a structure. If a member genre contained in a multi-generic phenomenon is still reliable to be recognized, it follows that that genre still has its essential obligatory elements. Therefore, the essential obligatory elements of all the member genres in a multi-generic phenomenon must be included in the resulting integrative product.

Fourth, no new genre is formed in the process of integration. The resulting product of integration is not a brand-new genre; otherwise, there would be no multi-generic phenomenon at all. However, seen from the history of genre formation, a multi-generic phenomenon has the possibility to become a new independent genre. Namely, it is just the first step or primitive stage towards the forming of a whole new genre. When two or more genres appear in the same multi-generic environment so frequently and repeatedly that their integration has been gradually accepted among a discourse community, then a new genre would come into being. This process of forming a new genre may be labeled 'institutionalizing'; namely, an integration of two or more existing old genre has become institutionalized as one new genre. The literary genre free verse is an example of a multi-genre becoming institutionalized as a new genre. Free verse, which was invented by the American poet Walt Whitman, is an integration of two genres regularly-rhymed poetry and prose. As *Leaves of Grass*, (1959) in which the writing technique of multi-genre is abundantly employed, gradually wins tremendous applause and acclaim from ordinary readers as well as from literary critics, more and more writers attempt to make use of the new genre to compose poems. In that way the integration of regularly-rhymed poetry and prose has become institutionalized as a new genre free verse. However, not all multi-generic integration would turn out as a new genre in the end; those in which member genres associate temporarily with each other remain multi-generic phenomena.

In summary, a multi-generic phenomenon is a case of functional integration of two or more genres. The integration demonstrates itself at the levels of both genre and text. The resulting product of the process has the essential or obligatory elements of all its member genres, and it is not a new, independent genre, but a temporarily blending body which has the chance to be institutionalized as a new genre.

### 3.2 Classification of multi-genres

Generally speaking, there are two different criteria by which all the multi-generic cases could be classified into a small number of categories.

For the first place, all the multi-generic cases could be classified on the basis of the number of member genres that a multi-generic phenomenon contains. If there are two genres altogether that could be identified in a multi-generic exemplar, then we can say that it is a bi-generic phenomenon. All the texts produced by virtue of realization of a bi-generic case are advisable to be entitled as bi-generic texts. In the same way, if a multi-generic example is composed of three distinct genres, then it could be called as tri-generic one, and texts generated by it are thus labeled as tri-generic texts. If four genres associate with each other, then the resulting product would be quadri-generic and texts generated are quadri-generic texts. It is worthwhile noting here that all the texts representing only one genre are generally labeled as mono-generic texts.

The second way of classifying multi-generic cases is based on the comparative status occupied by the member genres in a multi-generic phenomenon. If all the member genres that could be identified in a multi-generic case have the equal status in the overall framework, then the multi-genre is an example of coordination. If the member genres are not equal in status or significance, with one being subordinated to another, then their blending body would be labeled as subordinating multi-genre. In comparison with the former category of coordination, subordinating multi-genre is much more commonly employed. Take the genres of narration and description in a novel for example. It is obvious that narration is a necessarily fundamental feature in novel and description is just an ancillary one. Therefore, the comparative statuses occupied by them in the novel are in no means equal, with that of narration being predominant over and superior to that of description. As a result, they form a case of subordinating multi-generic phenomenon.

In addition to coordination and subordination, there is another category which could be labeled as embedding. In an embedding, one member genre of a multi-generic phenomenon is included or embedded into another, with the former being called embedded genre and the latter embedding one. Examples of embedding multi-generic phenomenon are the quotation of some poems in a speech or address and the

insertion of dialogue in a novel. In the first instance, the genre of poetry is embedded into that of speech; in the second dialogue being contained in that of a novel.

To sum up, the number of member genres involved in a multi-generic phenomenon and their comparative status in the overall framework are the two major criteria for the classification of the universal phenomenon of generic integration. The former would yield such sub-categories as bi-generic, tri-generic, quadri-generic, and the like. Compared with the number of sub-categories produced according to the first criterion, those by the second are relatively limited and definite; only three kinds are recognized: coordination, subordination, and embedding. Of course, these two kinds of classification could be combined with each other; thus, what would be produced by such combination are sub-categories like bi-generic subordination, tri-generic embedding, quadri-generic coordination, and so on. For the purpose of convenience in the research, the thesis mainly concentrates its attention on the sub-category of bi-generic embedding phenomenon.

#### 4. MONO-GENERIC TEXTS V.S. MULTI-GENERIC TEXTS

Mono-generic texts are those which are generated by a single genre while multi-generic texts are defined as those by multi-generic integration. In comparison with mono-generic texts, multi-generic texts are exceedingly commonplace and universal. This has the implication that there is a great majority of multi-generic texts in the ocean of all the existing literature of writing, from ancient time to the contemporary time. It follows that multi-generic texts are exceedingly larger and much more tremendous than mono-generic ones in number. The great quantitative gap between these two kinds of texts may be accounted for by the following factors:

First, the complexity and complicatedness of communicative events and diversity of goals is the main factor that results in the exceedingly swelling of multi-generic texts in number. It is obvious that a complicated communicative event could not be realized linguistically by a step or stage alone; it needs a series of steps or stages to realize its goal. Under this circumstance, a mono-generic text is unable to undertake the task to accomplish such a complex communicative event. On the other hand, multi-generic texts could serve to meet such a purpose. Therefore, it is not surprising that multi-generic texts surpass mono-generic texts in number in an exceeding way, for the former has much wider and broader application than the latter in the real world. A typical example is the communicative event of compilation of a university department's handbook. In the book there may be a number of sections: one explaining why students should study the subject, one stating what the subject is about, one enumerating course outlines, one prescribing rights/ responsibilities/ penalties, and so on. It is impossible for a mono-generic text to fulfill such a complex and complicated communicative event with a large variety of sub-goals to be accomplished; only multi-generic text could be employed to achieve such a purpose.

Second, rhetorical consideration is another factor that leads to quantitative expansion of multi-generic texts. In composing a text, especially a written one, the author usually attempts to make use of all the rhetorical techniques available to make his meanings expressed as effectively and persuasively as possible. It is possible that an author makes use of some paragraphs typically realizing another genre to achieve the purpose of stylistic variety. For example, a speech deliverer may cite some psalms or proverbs from the Holy Bible in his or her address to make it much more convincing and impressive. Then what has been produced would be a multi-generic text, instead of a pure single genre of address.

In a summary, complexity of communicative events and diversity of goals and rhetorical consideration are two main reasons for the great majority of multi-generic texts over mono-generic one. Further research should be conducted to explore the analytic pattern for multi-generic texts.

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